
The Transformation of American Family Structure

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“EXPLODED—‘MYTH’ OF THE VICTORIAN FAMILY,” screamed the two-inch headline in the tabloid *Daily Mail* on April 5, 1990. The subheadline read, “People Today Care Far More, Historian Claims.” The historian referred to was Richard Wall, one of the foremost scholars of historical family structure, and the occasion for the article was a paper he presented to the British Sociological Association on the history of living arrangements among the elderly. The newspaper quoted Wall: “The image of a golden age in the past when granny sat beside the fire knitting, while helping to look after the children, is a popular myth . . . if anything, family ties were less strong in past centuries.”¹

Wall was not the first to explode this particular myth. In fact, his paper falls squarely within a prominent historiographical tradition. For more than thirty years, sociologists and historians have been combating the theory that there was a transition from extended to nuclear family structure. Instead, the revisionists argue, family structure has remained unchanged and overwhelmingly nuclear in northwestern Europe and North America for centuries. Recounting this revisionist interpretation has become obligatory in writing on historical family structure.²

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¹ *Daily Mail* (April 5, 1990): 3. Wall's paper was “Relationships between the Generations in British Families Past and Present,” presented at the 1990 annual meeting of the British Sociological Association and subsequently published in *Families and Households: Divisions and Change*, Catherine Marsh and Sara Aber, eds. (New York, 1992).

² Following U.S. Census Bureau practice, the term family refers in this essay to any group of related people who reside together, whereas the term household refers to a group of people who share living quarters, regardless of their relationships. A nuclear family is considered to be a married couple and their children residing together, with or without nonrelatives; an extended family is defined as one that includes any relatives beyond the nuclear group. Fragmentary families contain a subset of nuclear family members, and multigenerational families contain two or more adult generations in the direct line of descent. To maximize comparability, persons residing in group quarters under 1970 census definitions have been excluded from analysis except where otherwise noted. For discussions of the temporal comparability of the census concepts of family, household, and group quarters, see Steven Ruggles, “Comparability of the Public-Use Data Files of the U.S. Census of Population,” *Social Science History*, 15 (1991): 123-58; Daniel Scott Smith, “The Meanings of Family and Household: Change and Continuity in the Mirror of the American Census,” *Population and Development Review*, 18 (1992): 421-56.

This essay reexamines the revisionist argument about the history of the family in light of new evidence about long-run changes in American family structure. In particular, I use the new Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, a national database incorporating consistent individual-level data from the U.S. Census over the period 1850 to 1990. I also report findings from the only eighteenth-century American census of sufficient size and quality to permit a consistent analysis of family composition, the 1776 census of Maryland.³ The evidence suggests that the revisionist interpretation needs revising. In fact, a form of extended family structure was dominant in nineteenth-century America and quite probably in the eighteenth century as well. The American preference for extended family structure disappeared in the twentieth century, and I will offer a brief analysis of some explanations for this change.

Historians and sociologists have expended far more effort attacking the theory of a transition from extended to nuclear family structure than was ever expended promoting it. The notion that our ancestors lived in large extended families is widespread among the general public, but it was never more than a minor theme of sociological theorists. Daniel Scott Smith holds that the theory of an extended-to-nuclear shift in family structure appeared only rarely before the mid-1930s, and even at mid-century the theory remained unimportant.⁴ Thus, according to Smith, the thirty-year emphasis of revisionist historians on refuting the myth has been misguided.

Even if it was of secondary importance, the idea of a transition from extended to nuclear family structure was an established part of social theory by the middle of the twentieth century. The leading sociological theorists from the late 1930s through the 1950s, such as Louis Wirth, Ralph Linton, and above all Talcott Parsons, generally endorsed the view that at some time in the past—which could be anywhere from the late nineteenth century to the late Middle Ages—people typically resided with extended kin. Moreover, most of these sociologists regarded the isolated nuclear family as an ideal form for modern industrial societies and an essential underpinning of the American way of life.⁵

The challenges to the extended-to-nuclear model of family history began almost as soon as it entered the sociological canon. Starting in the early 1950s,

³ The source data used here are described in U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Technical Documentation for the 1960 Public Use Sample* (Washington, D.C., 1973); U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Public Use Samples of Basic Records from the 1980 Census: Description and Technical Documentation* (Washington, D.C., 1982); U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population, 1940: Public Use Sample Technical Documentation* (Washington, D.C., 1984); Michael Strong, et al., *User's Guide: Public Use Sample, 1910 Census of Population* (Philadelphia, 1989); Steven Ruggles, et al., *1880 Public Use Microdata Sample: User's Guide* (Minneapolis, 1992); Russell R. Menard, et al., *1850 Public Use Microdata Sample: User's Guide* (Minneapolis, Social History Research Laboratory, forthcoming). The 1776 Maryland census appears in Gaius Marcus Brumbaugh, ed., *Maryland Records: Colonial, Revolutionary, County and Church* (Baltimore, Md., 1915–28).

⁴ Daniel Scott Smith, "The Curious History of Theorizing about the History of the Western Nuclear Family," *Social Science History*, 17 (1993): 325–53.

⁵ Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," *American Journal of Sociology*, 44 (1938): 1–24; Ralph Linton, "The Natural History of the Family," in *The Family: Its Function and Destiny*, Ruth N. Anshen, ed. (New York, 1959); Talcott Parsons, "The Kinship System of the Contemporary United States," *American Anthropologist*, 45 (1943): 22–38; Talcott Parsons and Robert F. Bales, *Family, Socialization, and the Interaction Process* (Glencoe, Ill., 1955); Talcott Parsons, "The Social Structure of the Family," in Anshen, *The Family*.

Marvin Sussman wrote a series of articles with titles like "The Isolated Nuclear Family: Fact or Fiction?" which argued that although most people lived in nuclear families, they routinely depended on their relatives for assistance. By the early 1960s, the sociology journals were overflowing with essays devoted to overturning the Parsonian myth. Survey after survey discovered that Americans frequently had family get-togethers, telephoned their relatives regularly, and provided their kin with a wide variety of services. Eugene Litwak coined the term "modified extended family" to describe the system: it was a "coalition of nuclear families in a state of mutual dependence." The traditional extended family may have been abandoned, but even if relatives no longer lived together, they still relied on one another. Litwak argued that the modified extended family was the most efficient possible system for a society seeking to maximize democracy and technological progress.⁶

Other disciplines reinforced the attack on the myth of the shift to nuclear family structure. Anthropologists showed that many traditional peoples resided in nuclear families and that industrialization did not always lead to simplification of the family. Social gerontologists and social workers echoed the theme of the modified extended family as the characteristic form of industrial societies and extolled the virtues of extended family ties.⁷ And, finally, historians entered the fray.

In 1963, Peter Laslett and John Harrison published a delightful article on the social structure of two seventeenth-century English villages.⁸ For one of these villages—Clayworth, in Nottinghamshire—Laslett and Harrison had discovered a listing of inhabitants that allowed them to assess household structure. They found that only about one in ten households included any kin beyond parents and children. Thus, in Clayworth at least, the nuclear family predominated long before industrialization. In the next few years, Laslett and his colleagues at the newly formed Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure showed that Clayworth was not unique; population listings were uncovered for a hundred villages, and Clayworth proved to be highly representative. Throughout preindustrial England, extended families were rare.⁹

If the evidence on the lack of extended households in preindustrial England had come to light at another time, it probably would not have made a great impact on sociological thought. But the timing was perfect: the thesis of a shift from

⁶ Marvin B. Sussman, "The Help Pattern in the Middle Class Family," *American Sociological Review*, 18 (1953): 22–28; Sussman, "The Isolated Nuclear Family: Fact or Fiction?" *Social Problems*, 6 (1959): 333–40; Sussman, "Relationships of Adult Children with Their Parents in the United States," in *Social Structure and the Family: Generational Relations*, Ethel Shanas and Gordon F. Streib, eds. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965); Eugene Litwak, "Geographical Mobility and Extended Family Cohesion," *American Sociological Review*, 25 (1960): 385–94; Litwak, "Extended Kin Relations in an Industrial Democratic Society," in Shanas and Streib, *Social Structure and the Family*; see also William J. Goode, *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (New York, 1963).

⁷ George P. Murdock, *Social Structure* (New York, 1960); Sydney S. Greenfield, "Industrialization and the Family in Sociological Theory," *American Journal of Sociology*, 47 (1961): 312–22; Ethel Shanas, *Family Relationships of Older People* (New York, 1961).

⁸ Peter Laslett and John Harrison, "Clayworth and Cogenhoe," in *Historical Essays, 1600–1750: Presented to David Ogg*, H. E. Bell and R. L. Ollard, eds. (London, 1963).

⁹ Peter Laslett, "Introduction," in *Household and Family in Past Time*, Peter Laslett and Richard Wall, eds. (London, 1972).

extended to nuclear family structure in the industrial revolution was already under attack, so the results from Cambridge found a ready audience.

The historical work cemented a subtle strengthening of the critique of Parsons and the other proponents of a shift from nuclear to extended families. The early opponents of the thesis that industrial society demanded an isolated nuclear family structure had implicitly acknowledged that a shift in living arrangements had taken place, but they argued that kin relationships beyond the household remained strong. Now it appeared that extended household structure had never been the norm of Western society. The new orthodoxy embraced both these ideas. The revisionists concluded that the nuclear family was always the preferred form, but the key to understanding the family lay with the invisible ties that bound family members even when they lived apart.¹⁰

The revisionist orthodoxy is now ubiquitous. Among both historians and sociologists, the long-run dominance of a nuclear family system is generally accepted as empirical fact. Laslett's publications on the history of the family have generated a vast literature: they have been cited some 3,000 times in journal articles, not to mention citations in monographs, collected essays, and textbooks. This citation record far exceeds that of any other research in the field.¹¹

UNTIL RECENTLY, HISTORIANS LACKED SUFFICIENT DATA to trace long-run national trends in family structure. With a few notable exceptions, empirical analyses of family structure therefore ignored the issue of long-term change. Instead, the great majority of historical studies examine living arrangements in one or two communities at a single point in time or over a decade or two. We have had no way of determining if the communities are representative, and comparisons between studies have been complicated by variations in data sources, data collection procedures, and classifications of family structure. Moreover, the community studies have not ordinarily produced statistics that are directly comparable to data from the recent past.¹²

A new data source allows us to generate for the first time a consistent series of national statistics on family structure over the past century. This source is the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), a national historical census

¹⁰ In the current version of the revisionist interpretation, generalizations about the continuity of nuclear family structure are ordinarily limited to northwestern Europe and the United States. For a recent summary of the revisionist viewpoint, see Tamara K. Hareven, "The History of the Family and the Complexity of Social Change," *AHR*, 96 (February 1991): 95–124.

¹¹ Laslett's citation record was estimated from the *Social Science Citation Index* (Philadelphia, 1965–91); and the *Arts and Humanities Citation Index* (Philadelphia, 1965–91).

¹² A few studies, mostly by demographers, have attempted long-term comparisons at the national level. These include Frances Kobrin, "The Fall in Household Size and the Rise of the Primary Individual in the United States," *Demography*, 13 (1976): 127–38; Daniel Scott Smith, "Accounting for Change in the Families of the Elderly in the United States, 1900–Present," in *Old Age in a Bureaucratic Society: The Elderly, the Experts, and the State in American History*, David Van Tassel and Peter N. Stearns, eds. (Westport, Conn., 1986); Steven Ruggles, "The Demography of the Unrelated Individual, 1900–1950," *Demography*, 25 (1988): 521–36; James A. Sweet and Larry L. Bumpass, *American Families and Households* (New York, 1987). Prior to the availability of the Public Use Microdata Samples, such studies were plagued by problems of comparability; see Ruggles, "Comparability of the Public-Use Data Files."

TABLE 1
Percentage Distribution of Household Composition by Race, United States,
1880–1980

	1880	1910	1940	1960	1980
A. Whites					
Fragmentary Households	13.2	13.6	16.5	19.7	33.5
Primary Individuals	5.0	6.2	9.5	14.6	26.5
Single Parents	8.2	7.4	7.0	5.1	7.0
Married-Couple Households	67.3	66.5	66.0	68.8	59.8
Childless Couples	11.0	14.5	20.6	23.1	24.7
Couples with Children	56.4	51.9	45.4	45.7	35.1
Extended Households	19.5	19.9	17.6	11.5	6.7
N	84,398	70,375	62,641	47,825	66,167
B. Nonwhites					
Fragmentary Households	20.7	20.9	23.4	27.8	42.9
Primary Individuals	9.1	11.5	14.7	18.5	25.0
Single Parents	11.6	9.4	8.6	9.3	17.9
Married-Couple Households	56.8	55.0	49.7	47.6	39.8
Childless Couples	11.6	16.6	19.9	16.3	11.3
Couples with Children	45.2	38.3	29.7	31.3	28.5
Extended Households	22.5	24.1	27.0	24.6	17.4
N	12,697	9,233	6,385	5,191	11,088

NOTES:

Group quarters under 1970 census definition excluded

Primary Individuals: persons heading households with no kin present

Single Parents: unmarried heads with children and no other kin

Childless couples: Married-couple households with no kin

Nuclear households: Married couples with children and no other kin

Extended households: Households with kin other than spouse and children

database in preparation at the University of Minnesota with funding from the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health. When complete, the IPUMS will include national samples of consistent census microdata from all census years for which individual-level data are available. The preliminary version of the database used in this analysis includes census data from 1850, 1880, 1910, 1940, 1960, and 1980.¹³

Table 1 provides a general classification of household composition in five census years from 1880, when the federal census first inquired about family relationships, to 1980. The classification used in Table 1 is a compromise between the Census Bureau approach to household structure and the system developed by Peter Laslett and widely used by historians. Households are divided into three broad categories on the basis of the composition of the primary family, which is defined as the group of kin related to the household head.¹⁴ Fragmentary

¹³ The final version of the IPUMS is scheduled to be released through both the National Archives and the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research in the summer of 1995; a preliminary test version of the data is available on request from the author. For descriptions of the source data, see note 3. The sample densities used throughout this essay were 1/200 for 1850, 1/100 for 1880, 1/250 for 1910, 1/500 for 1940, and 1/1000 for the remaining years.

¹⁴ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population: 1970*, Subject Reports; Final Report, PC(2)-4A,

households consist of individuals residing without kin and single-parent households. Married-couple households are defined as married couples residing with or without their children but with no other relatives. Extended households include additional kin, such as parents, children-in-law, or grandchildren of the head.

The most striking change shown in Table 1 is the increase of fragmentary households. Most of the increase in fragmentary households came in the subcategory of "primary individuals," who are persons residing alone or with nonrelatives only. In contrast, the frequency of white single-parent households declined steadily from 1880 through 1960. This resulted from declining mortality, which reduced the frequency of widowed parents. Since 1960, the decline of widowhood has been offset by increasing divorce and births out of wedlock, so the frequency of single-parent households has started to rise.

The frequency of married-couple households remained stable among whites from 1880 through 1960 and has dropped modestly since then. However, the percentage of households consisting of childless couples has increased dramatically; among whites, the percentage more than doubled between 1880 and 1980. This change resulted from an increase in empty nest households, those composed of older couples whose children have all left home. If nuclear families are considered to be married couples residing with their children, then the late nineteenth century was the golden age of the nuclear family. In every census year since 1880, the frequency of households among whites consisting of a married couple and their children has declined significantly.¹⁵

In general, the patterns of change among nonwhites were similar to those of whites, but the magnitude of change was smaller. Moreover, in all census years, nonwhite households were much less often nuclear and more often fragmentary or extended than were white households. As Philip Morgan and his colleagues have recently pointed out, the long-run continuity of race differences in household structure contradicts much historical and sociological writing on the black family.¹⁶

Family Composition (Washington, D.C. 1973); Laslett, "Introduction," *Household and Family in Past Time*. For the sake of consistency, persons residing in group quarters under 1970 census definitions were excluded from the analysis. The 1970 definition is the only one that can be applied consistently across all census years from 1880 to 1980; for discussions of the effects of this exclusion, see Ruggles, "Comparability"; and Ruggles, "Demography of the Unrelated Individual." For the 1980 census, the Census Bureau eliminated the concept of household headship and adopted the "householder" concept instead; see the discussion in Smith, "Meanings of Family and Household."

¹⁵ The dramatic increase in primary individuals has generated a large literature; for example, see Kobrin, "Rise of the Primary Individual"; and Ruggles, "Demography of the Unrelated Individual." The long-term stability in the frequency of single-parent households has been widely cited by sociologists seeking to overturn, as Mary Jo Bane expressed it, "the myth of the decaying American family." Bane's influential book, *Here to Stay: American Families in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1976), also stressed the continuity of the nuclear family over the centuries and the continued importance of kin ties beyond the household. The argument that broken homes were almost as common in the late nineteenth century as in the late twentieth century is highly misleading, however. The apparent continuity is merely an artifact of mortality decline, and late nineteenth-century single parents—unlike those of the late twentieth century—did not ordinarily choose their marital status. On the increase in childless-couple households, see the discussion below on changing living arrangements of the elderly.

¹⁶ S. Philip Morgan, Antonio McDaniel, Andrew T. Miller, and Samuel H. Preston, "Racial Differences in Household and Family Structure at the Turn of the Century," *American Journal of*

For the purpose of evaluating the revisionist hypothesis, the most important category is the extended household. From 1880 to 1940, the percentage of extended households was relatively stable. After World War II, the percentage dropped sharply among whites; a smaller drop among blacks began after 1960. Despite these recent changes, Table 1 generally appears to support the basic revisionist position: for at least the past century, only a small minority of households have been extended.

If the revisionist thesis were only concerned about the percentage of extended households, that might be the end of it. Family historians, however, ordinarily argue not only that nuclear families predominated in the past but also that nuclear families were preferred. They take the evidence on household structure to mean, as Wall put it in the *Daily Mail*, that "if anything, family ties were less strong in past centuries." From the original challenges of Sussman and Litwak, the underlying concern of most revisionists has been the strength of ties among kin.¹⁷

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN HOUSEHOLD STRUCTURE and residential preferences is critical, because over the past century the opportunities to reside in extended households have shifted dramatically. Thirty years ago, Marion Levy argued that although the extended family is often the ideal type in preindustrial societies, it rarely predominates in real populations. Levy pointed out that, under high mortality conditions, few people can reside with elderly kin. In particular, three-generation families cannot be the norm in societies in which most people die before their grandchildren are born or very shortly thereafter.¹⁸

The stem family hypothesis, articulated by Lutz Berkner in the early 1970s, refined Levy's interpretation. In stem families, one child remains in the parental household after marriage, while any other children leave and form new nuclear households when they get married. The younger generation in stem families eventually takes over the farm or business, assuring labor continuity and providing the means of old age support. Berkner pointed out that the stem family is a process, not a particular household type. Each stem family begins with nuclear

Sociology, 98 (1993): 799–828. Also see Steven Ruggles, "The Origins of African-American Family Structure," *American Sociological Review* (forthcoming); Steven Ruggles and Ron Goeken, "Race and Multigenerational Family Structure in the United States, 1900–1980," in *The Changing American Family: Sociological and Demographic Perspectives*, Scott J. South and Stewart E. Tolnay, eds. (Westport, Conn., 1992).

¹⁷ Although virtually all the revisionists are concerned with the strength of kin ties and the quality of relations among kin, the significance of nuclear family structure is variously interpreted; compare, for example, Michael B. Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975); E. A. Wrigley, "Reflections on the History of the Family," *Daedalus*, 106 (1977): 71–85; Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (New York, 1977); Alan Macfarlane, *Origins of English Individualism: The Family, Property, and Social Transition* (New York, 1978); Richard Smith, "Kin and Neighbors in a Thirteenth Century Suffolk Community," *Journal of Family History*, 4 (1979): 219–56; Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York, 1980); John Hajnal, "Two Kinds of Pre-Industrial Household Formation System," in *Family Forms in Historic Europe*, Richard Wall, Jean Robin, and Peter Laslett, eds. (Cambridge, 1983).

¹⁸ Marion J. Levy, Jr., "Aspects of the Analysis of Family Structure," in Levy, *et al.*, *Aspects of the Analysis of Family Structure* (Princeton, N.J., 1965).

family structure, becomes extended with the marriage of a child, and then becomes nuclear again with the death of the elderly parents. Thus the extended family is only one phase of a stem family process. If the parents die early or the child marries late, there may be no extended phase at all. Berkner argued that, under preindustrial demographic conditions, even where stem families predominated most of them would appear to be nuclear families in a census taken at a given moment in time.¹⁹

The stem family is only one of several possible patterns of extended family structure. In other societies, historians and anthropologists have observed high frequencies of joint families, which include married siblings residing together. Such families were common in places such as nineteenth-century central Italy and late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Russia. These were high mortality societies, but that did not prevent a high frequency of extended families; because fertility was also high, the great majority of adults had surviving siblings with whom they could reside.²⁰

In the United States, the joint family pattern has barely existed. At least for the period 1850 onward, the percentage of persons whose spouse is present and who reside with their sibling whose spouse is present is barely measurable, never amounting to more than 0.1 percent of the married population. In every year for which data are available, the dominant form of extended family has been multigenerational, containing older parents residing with their adult children.

The strong aversion to co-residence between married siblings in nineteenth-century America sharply limited the potential for multigenerational families. Because fertility was high and every sibling who was married resided in a separate household, only a minority of households could contain multiple generations. A single set of parents could not live with more than one of their married children.

Mortality and fertility were not the only demographic factors to influence the potential for multigenerational families. Generation length was also important. With relatively late marriage and minimal fertility control, nineteenth-century Americans often bore children late in life. Long generations sharply limited the period during which parents and adult children were both alive, thus reducing or eliminating the extended phase of a stem family cycle.²¹

¹⁹ Lutz K. Berkner, "The Stem Family and the Developmental Cycle of the Peasant Household: An Eighteenth-Century Austrian Example," *AHR*, 77 (April 1972): 398–418; Berkner, "The Use and Misuse of Census Data in the Historical Study of Family Structure," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 5 (1975): 721–38.

²⁰ David I. Kertzer, who recently observed that "the notion of severe demographic constraints has been hard to kill," argues that demographic constraints on family structure are unimportant on the grounds that there was a high frequency of laterally extended joint families in a central Italian village at the turn of the century; see Kertzer, "Household History and Sociological Theory," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 17 (1991): 155–79; Kertzer, "The Joint Family Household Revisited: Demographic Constraints and Household Complexity in the European Past," *Journal of Family History*, 14 (1989): 1–15. But no one, to my knowledge, has argued that such families would necessarily be infrequent under any demographic conditions; from Levy onward, the argument of demographic constraints has always referred to multigenerational extended families. On Russian joint families, see Peter Czap, "The Perennial Multiple Family Household: Mishino, Russia," *Journal of Family History*, 7 (1982): 5–26.

²¹ On the relative sensitivity of co-residence to marriage age, fertility, and mortality, see Steven Ruggles, *Prolonged Connections: The Rise of the Extended Family in Nineteenth-Century England and America* (Madison, Wis., 1987); Kenneth W. Wachter, Eugene A. Hammel, and Peter Laslett, *Statistical Studies of Historical Social Structure* (New York, 1978). Both studies find that marriage age is the critical factor,

Mortality, fertility, and generation length shifted rapidly during the demographic transition of the past century, and this profoundly altered the potential for multigenerational family structure. Life expectancy at age 30 rose from about 30 years in 1850 to 46 years in 1980 (to ages 60 and 76), and this raised the proportion of people with an opportunity to reside with elderly relatives. Over the same period, total fertility dropped from 5.4 children to 2.2. Because the elderly almost never resided with more than one of their married children in any period, the high fertility of the nineteenth century meant that most households could not include elderly parents. Mean age at childbirth declined gradually from 1850 through 1980, from 30.7 to 26.5 among women and 35.6 to 29.2 among men, both because of falling marriage age and earlier cessation of childbearing. Long generations, short life expectancy, and high fertility in the nineteenth century meant that there was a small population of elderly people spread thinly among a much larger younger generation. Under these circumstances, the percentage of households with elderly extended kin was necessarily small.²²

But how small? Determining the effects of demographic conditions on the potential frequency of multigenerational families has proven to be no simple task. Demographers and historians have been working on the problem ever since Levy and Berkner first suggested that low observed frequencies of extended families might be the result of severe demographic conditions. Nevertheless, after almost three decades of debate, there is still no agreement about the effects of demographic conditions on family structure.

The first generation of studies, carried out in the 1960s and 1970s, seemed to confirm Levy's position that high mortality discouraged complex family structure. In 1978, however, Kenneth Wachter, Eugene Hammel, and Peter Laslett published a rebuttal of the Levy-Berkner thesis based on an elaborate demographic model. They concluded that "any resort to demography for the sake of reconciling a theory of stem-family formation behavior with such low levels of occurring complex households appears unjustifiable." Nine years later, I presented a critique of this work using an alternate demographic model and argued that Berkner's position was substantially correct. My analysis in turn has been the subject of sharp criticism by a member of the Cambridge Group.²³

The clash of demographic models has produced no consensus about the effects

but since marriage age changed modestly from the mid-nineteenth to the late twentieth century, fertility and mortality are more important in that period.

²² Ansley J. Coale and Melvin Zelnik, *New Estimates of Fertility and Population in the United States* (Princeton, N.J., 1963); U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Vital Statistics of the United States: 1988*, Volume 2, Part A (Hyattsville, Md., 1991); U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, D.C., 1975); Todd Gardner, "Marriage," in *America at 1880: A View from the Census*, Miriam L. King, Russell R. Menard, and Steven Ruggles, eds. (forthcoming). Mean age at childbirth was tabulated from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series.

²³ Ansley J. Coale, "Estimates of Average Size of Household," in Levy, *Aspects of the Analysis of Family Structure*; David V. Glass, "London Inhabitants within the Walls 1695," *London Record Society*, 2 (1966), introduction; Thomas K. Burch, "Some Demographic Determinants of Average Household Size: An Analytic Approach," *Demography*, 7 (1970): 61-70; E. A. Wrigley, *Population and History* (London, 1969); Brian Bradley and Franklin Mendels, "Can the Hypothesis of a Nuclear Family Be Tested Empirically?" *Population Studies*, 32 (1978): 381-94; Ruggles, *Prolonged Connections*; Wachter, Hammel, and Laslett, *Statistical Studies*; and, from the Cambridge Group, James E. Smith, "Method and Confusion in the Study of the Household," *Historical Methods*, 22 (1989): 57-60.

TABLE 2
Actual and Potential Percentages of Households with Co-residing Elderly Kin,
by Race, United States, 1880–1980

	1880	1910	1940	1960	1980
A. Whites					
Actual percent	11.1	11.7	11.9	8.9	5.2
Potential percent	15.7	18.0	23.2	28.0	31.7
Actual as a percentage of potential	70.7	64.9	51.3	31.8	16.4
Number of actual households	84,398	70,375	62,641	47,825	66,167
B. Nonwhites					
Actual percent	8.5	8.0	10.8	11.0	7.4
Potential percent	13.0	12.1	18.0	23.9	20.6
Actual as a percentage of potential	65.3	66.1	59.9	46.0	35.9
Number of actual households	12,697	9,233	6,385	5,191	11,088

NOTE: See text and note 26 for explanations.

of demographic constraints on historical family structure. Small differences in assumptions yield large differences in results. Demographic modelers can endlessly debate the technical details of our creations, because we lack sufficient historical information to test how well the models work. Moreover, there is growing evidence that all demographic models of kinship are systematically biased. It therefore seems unlikely that the historical debate will be resolved in the foreseeable future by means of the existing approaches to demographic analysis of the multigenerational family.²⁴

THE GENERAL STRATEGY OF PAST DEMOGRAPHIC MODELS of historical multigenerational families has been to estimate the maximum possible proportion of multigenerational families under a given set of demographic conditions and then to compare that estimate to the proportion of multigenerational families that actually existed in historical populations. The Integrated Public Use Microdata Series offers the opportunity of doing very nearly the same thing without recourse to an elaborate demographic model.

By necessity, multigenerational families usually include elderly kin. However, the percentage of households with the demographic potential to include co-resident elderly kin has not remained constant. Table 2 compares the actual and potential percentages of households containing elderly persons co-residing with kin from 1880 to 1980. Elderly persons are here considered to be those age 65 or older. The first row in each panel of the table shows the observed percentage of

²⁴ On the limitations of demographic models, see Steven Ruggles, "Confessions of a Microsimulator: Problems in Modelling the Demography of Kinship," *Historical Methods* (forthcoming); Ruggles, "Family Demography and Family History: Problems and Prospects," *Historical Methods*, 23 (1990): 22–31; Miriam L. King, "All in the Family? The Incompatibility and Reconciliation of Family Demography and Family History," *Historical Methods*, 23 (1990): 32–41; Ruggles, "Availability of Kin and the Demography of Historical Family Structure," *Historical Methods*, 19 (1986): 93–102.

households with co-resident elderly kin in each year. The frequency of such households increased slightly from 1880 through 1940 and then declined sharply.

The second row in each panel of Table 2 shows the *potential* percentage of households with co-resident elderly kin. The potential percentage represents what would have happened if every elderly person moved in with relatives. This is calculated by eliminating from the population all elderly residing without kin and increasing the number of households with co-resident elderly kin by the same amount.²⁵ The measure is conservative; it slightly overstates the potential percentage of households with co-resident elderly kin, because a few elderly had no living relatives. In 1880, some 16 percent of white households had the potential to include co-resident elderly kin; by 1980, this figure had doubled. Blacks had a smaller increase in the potential for co-residential households, from 13 percent to 21 percent. Among both whites and blacks in all census years, only a small minority of households had the potential to include co-resident elderly kin, and in the nineteenth century the demographic constraints on such households were especially severe.

The third row of Table 2 is the actual percentage of households containing co-resident elderly kin as a percentage of the potential percentage. Among whites, the percentage of potential co-resident households that actually existed declined steadily, from 71 percent in 1880 to 16 percent in 1980. Once again, the trend was the same among blacks, but the degree of change was significantly smaller.

This exercise demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of nineteenth-century households could not have included elderly kin even if every elderly person had moved in with relatives. Given that the average head of household in 1880 was 43 years old and there was on average a 30 to 35-year age difference between generations, multigenerational families ordinarily had to include elderly kin. It is clear, therefore, that the opportunities to reside in multigenerational families were sharply limited in the nineteenth century.

The changing influence of demographic conditions on multigenerational family structure can be clarified through a simple analysis of the changing opportunities of middle-aged adults to reside with parents. Table 3 focuses on persons age 40 to 44 in each census year—about the average age of household heads. The analysis is limited to whites since we lack sufficient mortality data to

²⁵ To be precise, the potential frequency of households containing elderly persons residing with kin is calculated as:

$$\frac{e_h + e_p + e_s}{nhh - e_p}$$

where e_h is the number of elderly individuals or couples actually residing with kin, e_p is the number of primary families consisting of elderly primary individuals or married couples residing without kin, e_s is the number of elderly individuals or couples residing as secondary individuals or secondary families without kin, including boarders, servants, and residents of group quarters, and nhh is the total number of households. As defined here, the potential frequency of households with co-resident elderly depends in part on the extent to which adults residing without elderly kin tend to reside together. The rise of primary individuals and decline of secondary individuals have greatly increased the total number of households; if these factors were held constant, the change in the potential frequency of elderly co-residence would be considerably greater than is shown in Table 2. See the related discussion in Miriam L. King and Samuel Preston, "Who Lives with Whom? Individual versus Household Measures," *Journal of Family History*, 15 (1990): 117–32.

TABLE 3
Effects of Demographic Change on Residence with Parents: Whites Age
40 to 44, United States, 1880–1980

	1880	1910	1940	1960	1980
A. Estimated percentage with surviving					
Mothers	33.4	40.1	49.6	61.3	72.6
Fathers	18.9	24.4	32.8	38.2	45.2
B. Estimated number of surviving children per parent	4.8	3.9	3.1	3.1	2.6
C. Number of surviving parents					
per 100 surviving children (A/B)					
Mothers	7.0	10.3	16.1	20.0	27.5
Fathers	4.0	6.3	10.6	12.5	17.1
D. Observed percentage residing with					
Mothers	6.4	7.7	8.2	5.9	3.5
Fathers	3.5	4.0	4.4	2.9	1.7
N	20,414	17,883	15,192	10,187	9,403

NOTE: See text and notes 27–28 for explanations.

assess the residential opportunities of blacks. The first row (A) provides estimates of the percentage of those age 40 to 44 with surviving mothers and fathers in each census year.²⁶ Survival of mothers was always more common than survival of fathers, both because women lived longer than men and because fathers tended to be older than mothers. The percentage of persons age 40 to 44 who had surviving parents more than doubled during the hundred years from 1880 to 1980. About three-fourths of this change resulted from falling mortality, and the other quarter was a consequence of declining generation length. Because people age 40 to 44 only rarely resided with siblings, the level of fertility also influenced opportunities to reside with parents. As shown in Row B of Table 3, the average number of surviving children per parent fell some 45 percent between 1880 and 1980.²⁷

²⁶ For each sex, parental survival was calculated as:

$$\sum_x \frac{l_x + 42.5}{l_x} b_x$$

where l_x is the number of persons alive at each exact age x , as determined from a cohort life table, and b_x is the proportion of children of the appropriate cohort born to people of each age. Cohort life tables for each possible birth year were calculated from period estimates. The period data from 1910 onward came from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Vital Statistics*, Section 6, p. 14; for earlier mortality data, I used regional model life tables from Ansley J. Coale and Paul Demeny, *Regional Model Life Tables and Stable Populations* (Princeton, N.J., 1983). Following the advice of Michael Haines (personal communication, April 21, 1993; compare Haines, "The Use of Model Life Tables for the United States in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Demography*, 16 [1979]: 289–312), I used Model West level 13.69 for 1900, level 12.57 for 1890, level 10.50 for 1880, level 12.40 for 1870, level 11.40 for 1860, and level 10.40 for 1850 and before. To calculate b_x , I tabulated the age of mothers and fathers at the birth of their children for women and men with children under two years old in each census year and used interpolation to create distributions of age at childbirth in 1837.5, 1867.5, 1897.5, 1917.5, and 1937.5, which are the birth years of persons 42.5 years old in 1880, 1910, 1940, 1960, and 1980. The parental mortality estimates assume that there is no relationship between age at childbirth and age at death.

²⁷ The estimates of the mean number of surviving children per parent were carried out according

The number of surviving parents per 100 surviving children (Row C) can be viewed as an index of the opportunities of persons age 40 to 44 to reside with parents. This measure suggests that if residential preferences had remained constant, we might expect there to have been a four-fold *increase* in co-residence with parents. About 41 percent of the overall change in surviving parents per surviving child resulted from declining parental mortality, 14 percent of the change resulted from declining generation length, and 45 percent of the change resulted from declining fertility.

The final row of Table 3 shows the observed percentage of persons age 40 to 44 residing with parents as measured from the historical census files. In 1880, the percentage actually residing with parents was extremely close to the number of surviving parents per 100 surviving children. This reinforces the interpretation that the great majority of those who could have resided with parents were actually doing so. Residence of the middle-aged with their parents increased between 1880 and 1940, but this increase was modest compared to the expansion of residential opportunities in the same period. In recent decades, co-residence with parents has declined even as opportunities to reside with parents continue to grow.

We may conclude from the analyses presented in Tables 2 and 3 that, in the late nineteenth century, the great majority of multigenerational families that could have existed actually existed. Because of declining fertility, increasing life expectancy, and a shortening of generations, by the late twentieth century the opportunities to form multigenerational families had increased dramatically. By 1980, only a small minority of potential multigenerational families existed.

THE APPARENT LONG-RUN STABILITY in extended family structure is therefore largely an artifact of demographic change. The standard measure of extended family structure—the percentage of households containing extended kin—is especially sensitive to changing demographic conditions. We can minimize the intervening effects of changing demography by adopting alternate measures that are less powerfully affected by demographic change. In particular, we can assess

to different procedures in different census years. For 1910, when the census included a variable on number of children surviving, the number of surviving children was estimated as:

$$\sum_x s_x + 42.5 \cdot b_x$$

where s_x is the mean children surviving for mothers of age x , and b_x is the proportion of persons who were 42.5 in 1910 born to mothers at age x . The calculation of b_x is described in note 26. Mothers are defined as those with at least one surviving child; women with no surviving children are irrelevant to the analysis and were excluded. The estimates for the period 1940–1980 are the same, except that the variable on children surviving is not available. Therefore, mean surviving children was approximated by substituting mean children-ever-born to women of each age for mean children surviving and then deflating the total by the proportion of persons of the appropriate cohort surviving to age 42.5. In 1880, there are no variables on either children ever born or children surviving, so I used the 1910 figure adjusted for changes in fertility and mortality. The fertility adjustment is calculated as the total fertility rate in 1837.5 over the total fertility rate in 1867.5, and the mortality adjustment is a ratio of proportions surviving to age 42.5 of the birth cohorts of 1837.5 and 1867.5. I used total fertility rates taken from Coale and Zelnik, *New Estimates of Fertility*.

TABLE 4
Percentage Distribution of Living Arrangements of Elderly Individuals and
Couples, by Race, Sex, and Marital Status, United States, 1880–1980

	1880	1910	1940	1960	1980
WHITES					
A. All elderly					
Alone/spouse only	15.9	20.3	30.7	53.4	74.4
With nonrelatives only	9.3	7.2	9.0	5.4	2.3
With any other kin	74.9	72.5	60.4	41.2	23.3
With any own child	64.4	61.4	48.6	29.3	16.1
With adult child	58.1	57.2	46.0	27.4	15.0
With other relative(s)	46.9	44.2	37.7	26.9	13.6
N	13,131	12,074	13,668	11,932	16,998
B. Unmarried women					
Alone	1.8	11.4	19.8	38.3	66.9
With nonrelatives only	10.9	7.3	9.9	7.5	2.9
With any other kin	87.4	81.3	70.4	54.2	30.2
With any own child	72.3	65.9	54.1	36.5	20.4
With adult child	71.3	65.3	53.6	36.2	20.3
With other relative(s)	67.5	58.9	50.3	39.3	20.3
N	4,462	4,658	5,229	4,748	7,367
C. Unmarried men					
Alone	20.8	14.2	22.9	41.8	63.5
With nonrelatives only	13.2	13.7	16.0	11.1	7.5
With any other kin	66.0	72.1	61.1	47.1	29.0
With any own child	54.5	59.7	45.7	31.1	15.4
With adult child	52.5	57.9	44.4	30.2	14.9
with other relative(s)	50.7	52.8	45.3	37.5	22.4
N	2,597	2,365	2,762	1,764	1,869
D. Married couples					
Spouse only	24.1	31.4	44.5	70.3	84.1
With nonrelatives only	6.4	4.1	4.7	1.8	0.5
With any other kin	69.5	64.5	50.8	28.0	15.4
With any own child	62.8	58.0	44.9	22.5	12.1
With adult child	50.8	49.4	39.7	18.8	10.0
With other relative(s)	30.1	26.6	22.4	12.5	5.1
N	6,072	5,051	5,676	5,420	7,762
NONWHITES					
A. All elderly					
Alone/spouse only	17.1	20.4	22.0	37.0	51.3
With nonrelatives only	13.3	8.8	12.0	8.7	5.3
With any other kin	69.7	70.8	66.0	54.3	43.4
With any own child	57.2	55.7	47.5	35.0	28.9
With adult child	40.3	45.3	41.5	31.7	25.2
With other relative(s)	46.2	51.0	48.9	41.8	30.5
N	1,599	1,097	1,115	1,165	2,114
B. Unmarried women					
Alone	1.5	11.0	11.0	26.2	44.7
With nonrelatives only	19.0	9.5	11.8	8.5	6.1
With any other kin	79.6	79.5	77.2	65.3	49.3
With any own child	64.4	60.7	56.1	43.4	31.5
With adult child	61.6	58.3	55.0	42.4	30.5
With other relative(s)	67.5	67.1	64.0	53.3	38.2
N	612	420	453	484	1,001

TABLE 4 (continued)
Percentage Distribution of Living Arrangements of Elderly Individuals and Couples, by Race, Sex, and Marital Status, United States, 1880–1980

	1880	1910	1940	1960	1980
NONWHITES (continued)					
C. Unmarried men					
Alone	32.4	26.6	24.0	39.1	52.2
With nonrelatives only	24.6	17.9	23.7	19.6	12.6
With any other kin	43.0	55.6	52.3	41.3	35.2
With any own child	31.7	45.4	35.7	23.9	19.2
With adult child	25.4	38.2	32.0	22.2	17.3
With other relative(s)	32.0	42.5	39.8	32.6	26.9
N	284	207	246	230	364
D. Married couples					
Spouse only	24.5	26.2	32.7	47.5	59.7
With nonrelatives only	3.7	4.0	5.2	3.3	0.8
With any other kin	71.8	69.8	62.0	49.2	39.5
With any own child	61.2	55.7	45.3	31.7	30.2
With adult child	27.9	36.8	32.5	25.1	21.9
With other relative(s)	33.3	40.2	37.8	34.1	22.0
N	703	470	416	451	749

NOTES:

Persons in group quarters under 1970 census definitions excluded

Married couples treated as single observations

Elderly are age 65 or older.

Adult children are age 21 or over.

multigenerational family structure from the perspective of the elderly instead of household heads. Under a universal stem-family regime, virtually all elderly with a surviving child would reside with a child.²⁸ The elderly are the only demographic group whose residential opportunities have remained reasonably stable over the past century. In all periods, the great majority of elderly have had the demographic possibility of residing with their children, even though only a minority of the younger generation has had the opportunity to reside with elderly parents.²⁹

Table 4 presents a classification of the living arrangements of persons age 65 or older from 1880 to 1980, broken down by race, sex, and marital status. Married couples are considered to be a single observation because the living arrangements of husbands and wives were not independently determined. The percentage of elderly whites residing alone or with their spouse only has gone up dramatically,

²⁸ The exception consists of elderly whose surviving children all reside with parents-in-law; if marriage partners were random, this situation would arise less than 5 percent of the time under turn-of-the-century fertility, marriage, and child mortality conditions.

²⁹ Although demographic changes have had some effects on the living arrangements of the elderly over the past century, it is easy to demonstrate that those effects are modest. The most important factor is the decline in fertility, which meant that the elderly had fewer children with whom they could reside. Offsetting this change was the decline in child mortality and increase in the ages of the elderly. For a general analysis of the effects of demographic change on the living arrangements of the elderly, see Steven Ruggles, "Living Arrangements of the Elderly in America, 1880–1980," in *Aging and Generational Relations over the Life Course: A Historical and Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Tamara K. Hareven, ed. (forthcoming); Smith, "Accounting for Change."

from 16 percent in 1880 to 74 percent in 1980. Unmarried elderly women were especially likely to live with others in the nineteenth century; for this group, the likelihood of living alone increased over thirty-fold between 1880 and 1980. Almost 75 percent of whites age 65 or older resided with kin in the late nineteenth century; by 1980, less than a quarter did so.

About 64 percent of the elderly whites in 1880 resided with their children. I estimate that only about 82 percent of the elderly in that year had any surviving children; therefore, approximately 78 percent of elderly whites who had children resided with them.³⁰ Unmarried men—mostly widowers—were less likely than unmarried women or married couples to reside with their children in the nineteenth century; still, a clear majority did so. A century later, residence with children was the exception regardless of sex or marital status.

The extent of change was smaller for nonwhites than for whites, but the trend was in the same direction. Until 1940, elderly whites were more likely to reside with children than were elderly nonwhites. In 1980, however, whites resided with children just over half as often as did nonwhites. The long-run decline of multigenerational family structure was thus much slower among nonwhites than among whites, but it was still dramatic enough: in 1880, 57 percent of elderly nonwhites resided with children, compared with 29 percent in 1980.

Although there were far too few elderly in nineteenth-century America to create a majority of multigenerational families, their co-residence with the younger generation was clearly a social norm. Viewed in terms of residential preferences, the thesis that family structure has been stable over the long run cannot be sustained. Indeed, the living arrangements of the elderly have been through a transition of magnitude comparable to the demographic transition itself, and that change is sharply at odds with the revisionist interpretation of family history.

WAS THE CO-RESIDENCE OF THE ELDERLY with their children and other relatives just a short-lived phenomenon of the late nineteenth century, or was it also the norm in the more distant past? Although the 1880 census was the first national census to provide explicit family relationships, from 1850 onward many family relationships can be inferred through information on surname, age, sex, and sequence in the household. For the period before 1850, evidence on family structure is exceedingly rare. Despite the frequent assertions by historians that colonial families were overwhelmingly nuclear, there is virtually no direct evidence on household composition in the colonial period. In fact, only one eighteenth-century census listing has come to light that is large enough and provides

³⁰ The estimate that 18 percent of elderly had no surviving children assumes that the proportion of people who ever married and who had no surviving children was approximately the same in 1880 as in 1900; the figures on fertility and child survival are based on tabulations of the 1900 Public Use Sample, described in Stephen Graham, *1900 Public Use Sample: User's Handbook* (Seattle, 1979). An additional 2 percent of elderly, approximately, would have been unable to reside with children because all their surviving children were residing with parents-in-law. On the race difference in the proportion of elderly residing in multigenerational families, see Ruggles and Goeken, "Race and Multigenerational Family Structure"; and Ruggles, "Origins of African-American Family Structure."

sufficient detail to estimate living arrangements of the elderly. This is the Maryland census of 1776, which includes information on surname, age, sex, and sequence in the household for some 6,000 whites residing in Harford, Frederick, and Prince George counties. Although we have no way of knowing the representativeness or reliability of this enumeration, I have included it because there is nothing else available for the period.³¹

To evaluate the living arrangements of the elderly in Maryland in 1776 and in the United States in 1850 in comparison to later census years, I developed a system of rules for inferring family relationships. These rules were tested against the 1880 and 1910 census years so that the reliability of the inferred relationships could be evaluated. For simple family relationships, the inference procedure is highly accurate; overall, for example, the rules correctly identify 99.4 percent of explicit spouse relationships and 96.5 percent of parent-child relationships in 1880. But any time the surname of kin differs, the relationship is missed. Thus the rules cannot identify such kin as married or widowed daughters. Because it was fairly common for the elderly to reside with married or widowed daughters, the inferred relationships significantly understate co-residence. The error, however, is reasonably consistent across census years since exactly the same rules have been applied by computer to all the censuses.³²

Table 5 compares the inferred family relationships of the elderly in Maryland in 1776 and the United States in 1850, 1880, and 1910. The percentage of elderly residing with children or other relatives in 1880 and 1910 is lower in Table 5 than in Table 4 because some family relationships cannot be identified. In particular, between 20 and 25 percent of children are missed by the inference procedure; almost all of these are married or widowed daughters. The category identified as resident with "others—relation unknown" includes both nonrelatives and relatives with different surnames.

The evidence in Table 5 shows that the transformation of residential preferences did not begin in 1880; the percentage of elderly whites residing with identifiable children or other relatives was even higher in 1850. In Maryland in 1776, the percentage of elderly residing with identifiable children was still higher, at 63 percent. If we allow for the married and widowed daughters who cannot be identified, probably almost 80 percent of the Maryland elderly resided with their children.³³ Given that some 15 percent of the elderly would have had no surviving

³¹ For examples of assertions by colonial historians that nuclear families predominated, see John Demos, "Families in Colonial Bristol, Rhode Island: An Exercise in Historical Demography," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 25 (1968): 40–45; and Phillip Greven, "Family Structure in Seventeenth Century Andover, Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 23 (1966): 234–56. The 1776 census of Maryland is described in Smith, "Meanings of Family and Household," and is reproduced in Brumbaugh, *Maryland Records*. I am grateful to Janet Lindman for providing me with a machine-readable copy of the Harford County portion of the data.

³² The complete inference procedure is described in Menard, *1850 Public Use Microdata Sample*. Table 5 excludes persons residing in group quarters under the 1880 PUMS definition instead of the 1970 census definition used in the other tables. This is because the 1970 definition cannot be constructed for 1850 or 1776, since it depends on information about family relationships; see note 14. The 1880 PUMS group quarters definition is described in Ruggles, *1880 Public Use Microdata Sample*.

³³ This assumes that the ratio of inferred children to actual children was similar in 1776 Maryland to the ratio in the United States in 1880.

TABLE 5
Living Arrangements of Elderly White Individuals and Couples, Family Relationships Inferred, Maryland Counties, 1776, and United States, 1850–1910

	Maryland		United States	
	1776	1850	1880	1910
Alone/spouse only	9.2	12.2	15.2	20.6
With others, relationship unknown	26.4	28.6	29.1	29.6
With identifiable kin	64.3	60.1	55.5	49.8
With identifiable own child	63.2	54.9	51.4	46.2
With adult child	51.7	49.4	46.3	42.8
N	87	2,363	13,525	12,348

NOTES:

- Co-resident nonwhites excluded
- Persons in group quarters under 1880 PUMS definition excluded
- Married couples treated as single observations
- Elderly are age 65 or older.
- Adult children are age 21 or over.

children, this suggests that residence of the aged with children was very nearly universal. Of course, the sample is small, and we cannot generalize from Maryland to other areas. It is nevertheless noteworthy that the only fragment we have of eighteenth-century American evidence on household composition sharply contradicts the revisionist orthodoxy.

THE FINDING THAT MOST OF THE ELDERLY in the nineteenth century resided in multigenerational families is not new. Beginning in the late 1970s, Daniel Scott Smith wrote a series of papers pointing to the marked contrast in living arrangements of the elderly between the late nineteenth century and the late twentieth century. Smith argues that the empirical evidence refutes the dominant interpretation of continuity in historical family structure.³⁴ Smith's work on the elderly is among the most sophisticated in the field, but it has attracted little notice from family historians.

Although Smith challenges the view that historical family structure has remained constant, he also maintains that the Western family has been characterized by "essential and perdurable nuclearity."³⁵ According to Smith, neolocal marriage was essentially universal: the younger generation in the nineteenth century ordinarily established new households when they got married. Then, when the older generation became widowed or infirm, they moved in with their

³⁴ In the present context, the most relevant of Smith's papers on the living arrangements of the elderly are D. S. Smith, "Life Course, Norms, and the Family System of Older Americans in 1900," *Journal of Family History*, 4 (1979): 285–98; Smith, "Historical Change in the Household Structure of the Elderly in Economically Developed Countries," in *Aging: Stability and Change in the Family*, Robert W. Fogel, S. B. Keisler, and Ethel Shanas, eds. (New York, 1981); Smith, "Accounting for Change." The co-residence of elderly with their children was also pointed out early on by Howard Chudacoff and Tamara K. Hareven, "From the Empty Nest to Family Dissolution: Life-Course Transitions into Old Age," *Journal of Family History*, 4 (1979): 69–83.

³⁵ Smith, "Accounting for Change," 88.

TABLE 6
Percentage Distribution of Marital Status and Sex of Adult Children by Marital Status of Elderly White Parents, Standardized by Age, United States, 1880

<i>Marital Status and Sex of Adult Children (Percent)</i>	<i>Marital Status and Sex of Parents</i>		
	<i>Unmarried Women</i>	<i>Unmarried Men</i>	<i>Married Couples</i>
Sons or Daughters			
Currently Married	58.8	59.6	32.9
Widowed/Separated/Divorced	9.5	7.8	9.7
Never Married Only	31.7	32.6	57.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Daughters			
Currently Married	27.5	24.0	12.7
Widowed/Separated/Divorced	6.6	5.9	6.2
Never Married Only	16.9	18.6	29.6
Total with daughters	51.0	48.5	48.5
Sons			
Currently Married	31.3	35.6	20.3
Widowed/Separated/Divorced	2.9	2.0	3.5
Never Married Only	14.9	13.9	27.8
Total with sons	49.0	51.5	51.5
N of Parents	3,162	1,356	3,201

NOTES: In cases where parents resided with more than one child, marital status and sex of child refers to eldest child.

Unmarried parents could be widowed, separated, divorced, or never married.

Standard population = all co-resident parent/child combinations.

Elderly are age 65 or older.

Adult children are age 21 or over.

children. Thus Smith interprets the high co-residence of the elderly and the younger generation not as evidence of a stem family pattern but rather as a conjugal family system with co-residential old age support.

In support of his interpretation, Smith points out that families consisting of two married generations were relatively rare. More often, married elderly resided with unmarried children, and unmarried elderly resided with married children. This pattern is illustrated in Table 6, which shows that in 1880 adult children residing with married elderly were significantly less likely to be married than were adult children residing with unmarried elderly. For Smith, this is evidence of a conjugal family system: single children remained in their parental household until marriage, and widowed elderly moved in with their married children. But there is an alternate interpretation of the pattern. If control over family resources typically did not pass to the younger generation until the retirement or death of a parent, adult children residing with married parents might often have been forced to delay marriage.

To determine whether the co-residence of the elderly with their children in the nineteenth century reflected a dominant stem-family pattern or a system of old age assistance, we have to know who moved in with whom. Census cross-sections cannot tell us how multigenerational families were formed, but they do provide a

few clues. If children established independent households upon reaching adulthood and their parents moved in with them later on, that implies that parents and children ordinarily resided separately for a period. Thus one would expect to find that the proportion of persons residing with children would decline in late middle age as the children left home and then increase again in old age as the parents moved in with their children. Under a stem family regime, by contrast, at least one child would never leave the parental household. One would expect no increase in co-residence of the elderly with increasing age.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of whites residing with their children by age, from 1880 to 1980. In recent census years, there has been the expected rise in co-residence among the very old. This pattern is most clearly evident in 1980, when persons age 80 or over were twice as likely to reside with children as those age 65 to 69. Smith's hypothesis about the formation of multigenerational families—that dependent elderly moved in with their children—fits well with the evidence from the twentieth century. But in 1880, there was no increase in co-residence with increasing age; in fact, the proportion of elderly residing with children actually declined with age. This finding is consistent with the interpretation that the elderly did not typically move in with their children for support; instead, the children never moved out. This stem family interpretation is further reinforced by the data from 1850 and 1776 Maryland, shown in Figure 2: neither data set shows a systematic rise in co-residence with children after age 65.³⁶

Headship patterns offer a second clue to the formation of multigenerational families. From 1790 to 1970, the federal census identified a head for every household. The meaning of headship may have shifted over time, but household heads may be assumed in all periods to have had higher status or authority than other household members.³⁷ Longitudinal evidence using linked censuses indicates that dependent elderly who moved into the household of a child were rarely listed as head of household. On the other hand, in stem families in which the child remained in the parental household after marriage, the child often assumed headship when the parents retired or became widowed.³⁸ Thus, when the elderly are listed as head, we can reasonably assume that they did not move in with their children; if a child is listed as head, however, that does not necessarily mean that the household was formed independently by the child. The percentage of elderly listed as head can therefore be regarded as a lower-bound estimate of the percentage remaining in their own households.

³⁶ The age pattern of co-residence with children in 1850 and 1776 is probably affected by the necessity to infer family relationships. Children with different surnames are missed; since such children are always married or widowed, they tend to be somewhat older than children with the same surname as their parents. Thus the inference procedure is likely to miss more children of the very old than children of younger elderly. This age effect would be too small, however, to affect the general conclusion that there was no significant rise in co-residence with increasing age in 1850 or 1776 Maryland.

³⁷ See Smith, "Meanings of Family and Household," for a discussion of change and continuity in the significance of headship.

³⁸ In some cases, dependent children moved back in with parents after residing independently for a time, but this appears to have been responsible for a small minority of multigenerational households. On the relationship between headship and household formation, see Stephen Gross, "Family, Property, Community: Persistence and Accommodation among German Americans in Rural Stearns County, Minnesota, 1860–1920" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1994).

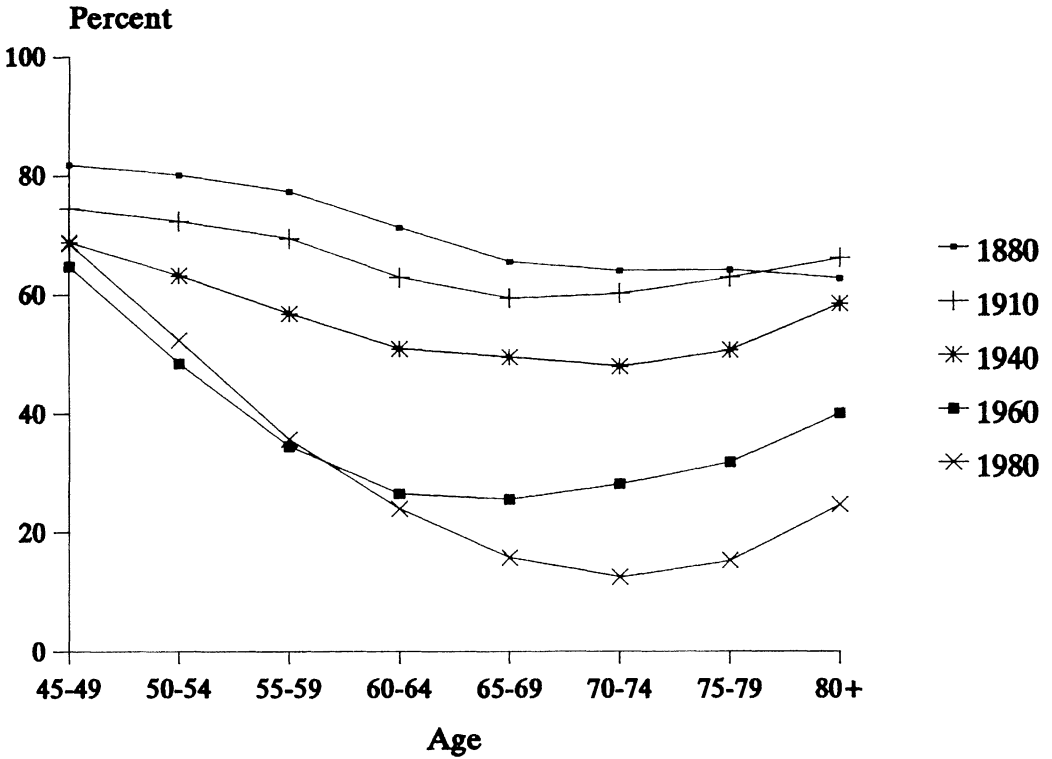


FIGURE 1: Percent of Elderly Persons Residing with Own Child, by Age: United States, 1880-1980.

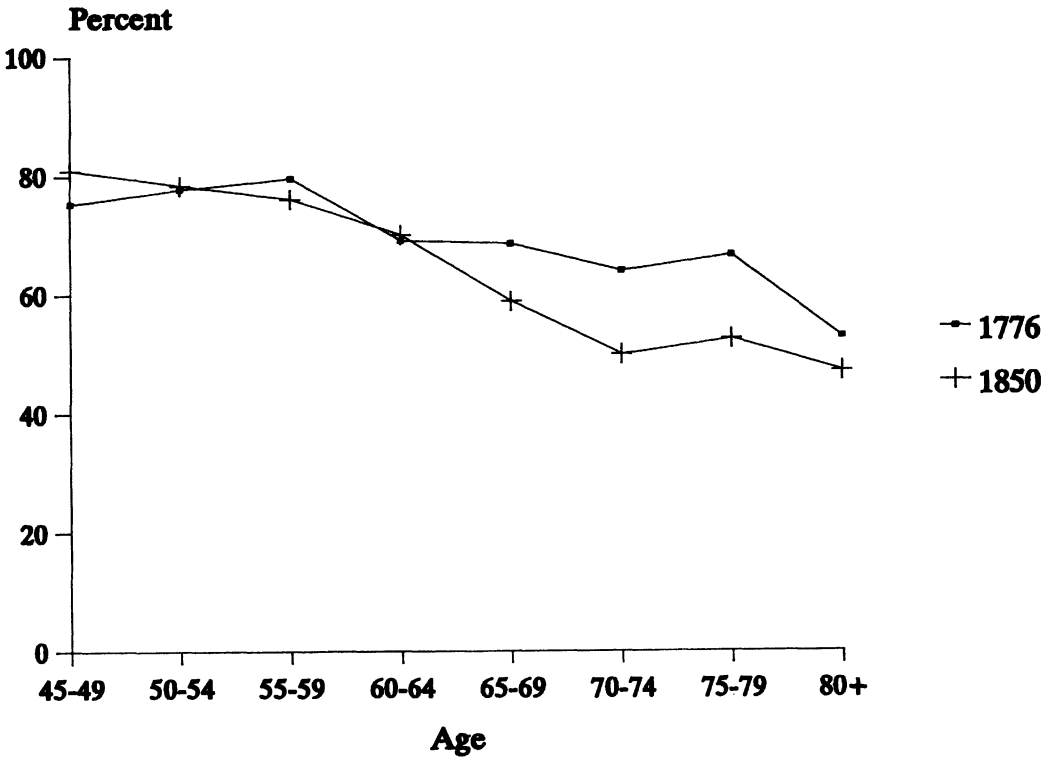


FIGURE 2: Percent of Elderly Residing with Own Child, by Age: Maryland Counties, 1776, and United States, 1850 (Family Relationships Inferred).

The 1880 census reveals that 62 percent of elderly residing with children were listed as head; the figure dropped slightly over time, to 55 percent by 1960. In earlier census years, the percentages were even higher: in 1850, the older generation was head in 69 percent of cases, and in 1776 Maryland it was 78 percent. The latter figures are based on inferred relationships, which may overstate headship of the elderly.³⁹ But the general conclusion is clear: in all the censuses through 1960, only a minority of multigenerational families resulted from dependent elderly moving in with their children. Moreover, headship patterns for the nineteenth-century censuses and for Maryland in 1776 are entirely consistent with a stem family interpretation.

The censuses demonstrate unequivocally that the great majority of nineteenth-century elderly who had a living child resided with a child. Was this a stem family arrangement? The evidence on headship and on the age pattern of co-residence clearly suggests that most of the co-residence was not merely old age support. Still, some elderly did move in with children during their old age. The most plausible interpretation is that both patterns were fairly widespread: sometimes adult children remained in their parental households, and sometimes the elderly moved in with their children.

Even if both patterns were common, I am persuaded by the evidence on headship and the age patterns of co-residence that the stem family arrangement was the predominant form in nineteenth-century America. This does not contradict Smith's position that marriage was largely neolocal. Under a stem family system in a high fertility population, most people would have established independent households when they married. But in the nineteenth century, one child typically remained behind.

IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, the multigenerational family has virtually disappeared. Once we have accepted that family structure has not remained static, the central question becomes obvious: what has led to the transformation of family structure since the nineteenth century? This question turns out to be more difficult to answer than one might expect.

Sociologists and demographers have devoted much effort to analyzing the increasing tendency of the elderly since 1960 to live alone. The leading explanation: rising incomes allowed increasing numbers of the aged to maintain separate residences. Although there is some disagreement, most recent studies suggest that about half of the recent shift toward separate residence can be explained by rising income.⁴⁰

³⁹ This is because children with different surnames were married or widowed, and elderly residing with such children would be less likely to be heads than elderly residing with unmarried children; see note 36.

⁴⁰ John C. Beresford and Alice M. Rivlin, "Privacy, Poverty, and Old Age," *Demography*, 3 (1966): 247-58; A. Chevan and J. H. Korson, "The Widowed Who Live Alone: An Examination of Social and Demographic Factors," *Social Forces*, 51 (1972): 45-53; Geoffrey Carliner, "Determinants of Household Headship," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 37 (1975): 28-38; Kingsley Davis and P. van den Oever, "Age Relations and Policy in Advanced Industrial Societies," *Population and Development Review*, 7 (1981): 1-18; R. T. Michael, V. R. Fuchs, and S. R. Scott, "Changes in the Propensity to Live

It is doubtful, however, whether this simple economic explanation can account for the change before 1960. In the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, those elderly with high economic status were the ones most likely to live with their relatives. Very few elderly resided entirely on their own; the poorest elderly were the group that most frequently resided without kin, either as boarders or servants or in institutions. In 1850, for example, there was a strong positive relationship between real property of the elderly and co-residence, and the richest 10 percent lived with their adult children 50 percent more often than the propertyless. An index of occupational incomes yields even more striking results: in 1880, the top economic quartile of elderly resided with kin twice as often as the bottom quartile. With each successive census, the positive relationship between occupational status and co-residence became weaker and weaker. Finally, in 1960, the relationship reversed, and for the first time the lowest quartile of elderly became the group most likely to live with relatives. The association between high socioeconomic status and multigenerational family structure before 1940 is further confirmed by evidence on the presence of servants, homeownership, value of home, farm value, literacy, employer status, and neighborhood socioeconomic characteristics. For the post-World War II period, information on income, home value, and years of education verifies the finding that multigenerational families are most frequent among the poorest and least educated.⁴¹

The turnaround in the relationship between socioeconomic status and family structure during the past century is of key importance. The association between high economic status and multigenerational family structure in the nineteenth century is precisely what one would expect under a stem family system. Those elderly with an inheritance to offer (especially in the form of a farm or business) were most likely to have a grown child remain with them in old age. As one would predict, farm owners and other proprietors were the occupational groups who most often resided with children. The elderly without resources of their own were sometimes able to move in with children, but they were also the group most likely to end up as boarders, in service, or in the poorhouse.

The concentration of multigenerational families among the poor in the late twentieth century demonstrates that inheritance is no longer a leading motive for the younger generation to reside with their parents. Instead, co-resident elderly tend to be welfare relatives—the infirm, the dying, and the destitute. It is likely that such dependent elderly kin were frequently taken in by relatives in the nineteenth century as well, but before 1940 the elderly with economic power were

Alone, 1950–1976,” *Demography*, 17 (1980): 39–53; Fred C. Pampel, “Changes in the Propensity to Live Alone: Evidence from Consecutive Cross-sectional Surveys,” *Demography*, 23 (1983): 433–47; Ruggles, “Demography of the Unrelated Individual”; Ruggles, “Living Arrangements of the Elderly”; also see Michael Anderson, “The Impact on Family Relationships of the Elderly of Changes since Victorian Times in Governmental Income Maintenance Provisions,” in *Family, Bureaucracy, and the Elderly*, Ethel Shanas and Marvin B. Sussman, eds. (Durham, N.C., 1977); R. Angel and M. Tienda, “Determinants of Extended Family Structure: Cultural Pattern or Economic Need?” *American Journal of Sociology*, 87 (1982): 1360–83; L. E. Troll, “The Family of Later Life: A Decade Review,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 33 (1971): 263–90; Miriam L. King, *Changes in the Living Arrangements of the Elderly: 1960–2030* (Washington, D.C., 1988).

⁴¹ Ruggles, “Living Arrangements of the Elderly”; Ruggles and Goeken, “Race and Multigenerational Family Structure”; Ruggles, *Prolonged Connections*; Smith, “Accounting for Change.”

even more likely to live with kin. As the stem family pattern diminished and the elderly with economic resources began to reside on their own, multigenerational families increasingly conformed to Smith's model of co-residential old age support.

The evidence on the relationship of economic status to living arrangements contradicts the thesis expressed by some historians that the harsh economic conditions faced by the working class under early industrial capitalism strengthened the interdependence of family members and led to a higher frequency of extended families.⁴² More important, it eliminates the simplest economic interpretation of the decline of co-residence among the elderly. All things being equal, a rise in economic resources of the elderly between the mid-nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century would have resulted in an increase of residence with kin, not a decline.

MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY SOCIOLOGICAL THEORISTS offered an alternate explanation for the decline of the extended family. They argued that industrialization and urbanization led to a breakdown of the traditional family economy. Urban industrial capitalism demanded a flexible and mobile family; the stripped-down nuclear family prevailed because it was functionally adapted to the new economic realities. The United States around the turn of the century provides an appropriate laboratory for testing this hypothesis. Some parts of the country were highly industrialized and predominantly urban, while in other places the agricultural family economy was still the primary mode of production.

To assess the effects of urbanization and industrialization on the living arrangements of the aged, I carried out multivariate analyses of the effects of local urban development and manufacturing on family structure in 1880 and 1910. This study will appear elsewhere, but the main findings are easily summarized.⁴³ Neither urban development nor manufacturing was significantly associated with separate residence of the elderly. In fact, when we control for other characteristics, urban elderly in 1910 were significantly more likely to reside with kin than elderly in rural areas.

There were two local characteristics related to separate residence in old age: percentage of literate in the county and rate of school attendance. The higher the level of local education, the fewer elderly resided with kin. This finding brings to mind John Caldwell's widely cited theory of fertility decline. Caldwell argues that traditional attitudes about the family have been undermined by individualistic values transmitted through schooling; the same mechanism could prove to be

⁴² This thesis was expressed by Michael Anderson, *Family Structure in Nineteenth Century Lancashire* (Cambridge, 1971); Tamara K. Hareven, "The Dynamics of Kin in an Industrial Community," in *Turning Points: Historical and Sociological Essays on the Family*, John Demos and S. S. Boocock, eds. (Chicago, 1978); Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time: The Relationship between the Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community* (Cambridge, 1982); Katz, *People of Hamilton*; John O. Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution: Early Industrial Capitalism in Three English Towns* (London, 1974); John Modell, "Patterns of Consumption, Acculturation, and Family Income Strategies in Late Nineteenth-Century America," in *Family and Population in Nineteenth-Century America*, Tamara K. Hareven and Maris A. Vinovskis, eds. (Princeton, N.J., 1978). For further discussion, see Ruggles, *Prolonged Connections*.

⁴³ Ruggles, "Living Arrangements of the Elderly."

important for the transformation of family structure.⁴⁴ Education could also have had a more direct effect. The increasing importance of human capital as opposed to occupational or property inheritance may have undermined the economic logic of the stem family. As life chances were increasingly determined by education instead of inheritance, the incentives for grown children to remain in their parents' households would have diminished.

Another hypothesis was offered by Marion Levy. He suggested that as demographic constraints relaxed and people were increasingly able to reside in extended families, "sources of stress and strain" emerged that led them to change their preferred family form. A similar interpretation has been proposed by Frances Kobrin, who argues that as the ratio of elderly to adult children increased, the norm of co-residence was undermined. In other words, the ideal of co-residence could be maintained only as long as a small minority actually lived with their parents; the demographic transition indirectly led to a transition in residential preferences.⁴⁵

Social norms about multigenerational families clearly have changed. Separate residence is now preferred both by the older generation and by their children.⁴⁶ This shift in norms is consistent with the demographic interpretation suggested by Levy and Kobrin. But there is one major problem: the transformation of attitudes about the family has not been confined to the relationship between elderly parents and their adult children. In every sphere of family life, there has been a loosening of bonds of obligation among kin. There has been a revolution in attitudes toward divorce, cohabitation, premarital sex, and single parenthood.⁴⁷ It seems unlikely that the shift in attitudes toward co-residence between adults and their parents is unconnected to the broader changes in family values. The demographic thesis is therefore too narrow to explain the larger changes in family attitudes. We are faced, in effect, with explaining the rise of individualism in the twentieth century, a task far beyond the scope of this essay.

MY CONCLUSION THAT A STEM FAMILY PATTERN predominated in nineteenth-century America could be wrong. Although the evidence is entirely consistent with a stem family reading, it could also be interpreted differently. The only way to know for certain whether it was a stem family system or a system of co-residential old age support would be to carry out longitudinal studies, probably using linked census data together with information on inheritance and property transfers. Such studies are feasible and should be pursued.

But my main point is indisputable: the past century has witnessed a radical transformation of residential preferences. The magnitude of change was obscured by changing demographic constraints, so most family historians adopted the view that family structure has been stable for centuries in northwestern

⁴⁴ John C. Caldwell, *Theory of Fertility Decline* (London, 1982).

⁴⁵ Levy, "Aspects of the Analysis of Family Structure"; Kobrin, "Fall in Household Size."

⁴⁶ Among many other surveys on this point, see Stephen Crystal, *America's Old Age Crisis* (New York, 1982), 222.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Arland Thornton, "Changing Attitudes toward Family Issues in the United States," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 51 (1989): 873-93.

Europe and the United States. This view has had a crippling effect on the field: once scholars accepted that no significant change in family structure had occurred, the topic ceased to be interesting. Partly as a result, historians of northwestern Europe and the United States now rarely undertake quantitative studies of historical family structure.⁴⁸

The revisionist interpretation undermined the study of change in living arrangements not just by asserting that family structure had remained the same but also by asserting that family structure was relatively unimportant. For forty years, sociologists and historians have consistently repeated the theme that the key to understanding the family lies with kin relationships beyond the household. They have succeeded in demonstrating that people who live apart from their relatives nonetheless care for them deeply, lend them money in times of need, and telephone regularly. But the very fact that kin do not live together almost inevitably means that they play a relatively small role in one another's everyday life. According to a recent survey, a majority of elderly say they saw at least one of their children within the previous week. A hundred years ago, however, most elderly saw one of their children at breakfast each morning.⁴⁹ However great the interaction of kin who live separately, it is bound to be less than the interaction of kin who live together.

Co-residence is not just the best indicator of the intensity of kin interaction over the past century and a half, it is the only consistently available indicator. We have no consistent source of information on relationships among kin who live apart. Long-run changes in kin ties beyond the household are therefore virtually impossible to gauge, and any generalizations about such changes will no doubt always remain speculative.

If we want to understand how family life was transformed, the study of family structure is an essential starting point. The key period of change—the past hundred years—has been neglected by family historians. This is the only period for which we now have consistent, abundant, and high-quality information on family structure. The Integrated Public Use Microdata Series offers unprecedented opportunities to describe and analyze changes in living arrangements. We may never know if people today care more about their families, but, by combining the new data with qualitative sources and longitudinal local studies, we may at least discover how and why the nineteenth-century multigenerational family disappeared.

⁴⁸ In a 1991 state-of-the-field essay in the *AHR* on the history of the family, Tamara Hareven cited over eighty quantitative studies pertaining to northwestern Europe and the United States in the modern period. More than three-fourths of these publications appeared in the 1970s or earlier, and 90 percent had appeared by 1983. Many of the studies that were carried out focus on family strategies in a particular period, a style of research that is reminiscent of the static functionalism of mid-twentieth-century sociology. Hareven, "History of the Family."

⁴⁹ Ethel Shanas, *Old People in Three Industrial Societies* (New York, 1968).